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'The Virtues of a Drop of Cleansing Water':[1] domestic work and cleanliness in the British working classes, 1880–1914

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This article examines the material culture of British working-class homes in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, paying particular attention to the issue of cleanliness. Using evidence from social investigations and autobiographies, it asks how cleanliness, both as a material practice and as an idea, was deployed within the working-class home and its spatial arrangements. The relationship of working-class and middle-class ideas of domesticity is examined, with different chronologies of change for subjects of different class backgrounds highlighted. It is proposed that to a certain extent working-class women found their 'widening sphere' within, rather than beyond, domestic life.

Introduction

This article is about the material culture of British working-class homes in the late Victorian and Edwardian period; in particular, it is about the material culture of cleanliness. Figure 1 is a photograph showing the Cantwell family, from Islington in London, in 1913. Henry Cantwell was a London cab-driver, employment that gave him and his family a position at the more secure end of the urban working classes. The family are posed very formally for a studio portrait, and they are all, adults and children, very clean, very neat, very tidy, very highly polished and very carefully ironed. Such

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Figure 1 The Cantwell family, Islington, London, 1913 (courtesy of Jean Sinfield).

qualities—of cleanness, neatness, polish—clearly mattered to these people. Who would have been responsible for the Cantwells' extreme neatness? There is no documentary evidence that supplies an answer to this question, but, unless the Cantwell family set-up was very unusual indeed, it was almost certainly Ellen Cantwell, wife and mother, who carried out the majority of the tasks of cleanliness in this family group: women's work in the domestic sphere is an important issue in this article.

The larger study from which this article derives is about domestic cleanliness broadly defined—in this photograph we have *bodies* and *clothes*, but these were viewed at the time that the photograph was taken as part of a continuum that also included the cleanliness of homes. Home was the site where clean bodies and clean clothes were produced, and I analyse the cleanliness of all three—bodies, clothes, homes—as closely related activities, and ideas. This article, however, will mostly concern the cleanliness of homes, with its core material an analysis of the relationship of cleanliness to issues of domesticity and women's work in the working-class home.

My chief aims derive from the title of the conference at which this paper, and the others in this issue, were first presented; 'Beyond the Widening Sphere'. Martha Vicinus's influential anthologies of 1972 and 1977 (*Suffer and be Still* and *A Widening Sphere*) created a historiography comprised, in the first volume, of an investigation into

th limitations and restrictions imposed on women in a social system of gender in quality in the nineteenth century.[2] The second volume marked the increasing re ognition by historians that not all women at this period were entirely limited by g der. Discourse around their roles was lively and contested, and, especially in the la er part of the century, some women were able to find a function beyond the confines o lomesticity.[3] In historiographical terms, the question of what is *beyond* this 'widen- in sphere' clearly has many answers: where have historians gone next in seeking to u lerstand the detailed pattern of female experience? I would like to propose one p sibility, based upon a reconsideration of domesticity, and specifically the domestic- it of working-class women, whose home lives have tended to receive a relatively n agre portion of historical attention in nineteenth-century women's studies. (In th se original anthologies, only Peter N. Stearns' rather unsatisfactory essay, 'Working- C ss Women in Britain, 1890–1914' gave full attention to the working classes.)[4]

The suggestion that domesticity be reconsidered in assessing women's lives is not a n vel one. There have been many studies that examine the *pleasures* as well as the pains o vomen's relationship to domestic duty in this and other periods, moving beyond the p haps rather crude (but very necessary) critique provided by the women's movement o the 1970s, and seeing that while domestic routine has traditionally been an instru- n nt of the control of women, it has also been the power base for much of the influence th it women have been able to wield. A good recent example is Judy Giles's *The Suburb a d the Parlour*, which finds within women's experience of the domestic in the early t entieth century a real engagement with modernity.[5] Yet Giles is perhaps typical in h ing slightly neglectful of the working classes in her analysis, and in particular the fine g ain of *difference* between working-class experience and that of the middle class. Thus, within an article built largely on an empirical investigation into the meanings of cleanliness in the working-class home, I will pause at intervals to consider certain historiographical and interpretive issues related to this question. The first of these points concerns the *interactions* between the working and middle classes over the matter of domesticity. I will also consider the relative chronologies of changing experience across the classes. The last, and concluding, point will touch upon ideas of progress and modernity in relation to domesticity. My analysis will focus on the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, a time at which working-class domesticity was under particular scrutiny, and was beginning the long process of change brought by gradually improving material conditions and the emergence of a consumer economy. Within this context, the idea and practice of domestic cleanliness was richly symbolic, and fiercely contested.[6]

A brief note on sources: the study on which this article is based uses a triangle of sources. The first category is what I call 'authoritative' or 'civilising' sources, i.e. those documents such as social surveys and qualitative works of social investigation that increasingly attempted, from the 1890s onwards, to investigate and reform the poor and the working classes. Examples are works such as Charles Booth's and Seebohm Rowntree's famous investigations into poverty, the writings of social worker Helen Bosanquet, and district nurse M. E. Loane.[7] None of these are newly discovered sources, but they have not before been used to investigate the subject of cleanliness, on which, *inter alia*, they contain rich evidence of both real practices and

multiple layers of discourse. Also considered in this category are household adv ce books and magazine columns. My second set of evidence consists of autobiograpl es and memoirs; these subjective, nostalgic, partial accounts are a fantastically rich et problematic source, and household cleanliness, and the role of the mother in its accomplishment, is a recurring theme within many of them.[8] I have chosen to int r-pret them partly as self-written ethnographies, finding within them the voices of ny subjects. Finally, there are soap advertisements. These constituted a proliferat ng system of commercial imagery that had an oblique yet revealing relationship to b th lived experience and to other discourses of cleanliness. In this article, soap adverti e-ments are discussed less fully than other evidence, but I have included two vis al examples.

I

How was cleanliness, both as a material practice and as an idea, deployed within he working-class home, and particularly its spatial arrangements? We might consider h w the siting within the home of the *tasks* of cleanliness, as well as the contrasting *state* of cleanliness in different rooms with different purposes, differentiated the hom 's constituent parts. The analysis that follows is based on a wide reading of those soc al investigation and autobiographical sources mentioned above.

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw increasing official and quasi-offic al concern over the state of working-class housing, and in particular over squalid a d insanitary conditions. In 1883 a campaigning pamphlet was published entitled *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, which includes the following passage, describing the 'pestilential human rookeries' in which the poorest class lived:

> To get into them you have to penetrate courts reeking with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet; courts, many of them which the sun never penetrates, which are never visited by a breath of fresh air, and which rarely know the virtues of a drop of cleansing water.[9]

Yet by this date state action, in the form of the 1875 Public Health Act, had already started a process that was to see the building, down to 1914, of many 'by-law' homes.[10] These did not necessarily help the inhabitants of the rookeries described above, being targeted at more settled and 'respectable' segments of the working classes, but they were nevertheless intended as a response, in part, to the perceived dirt and disorder that was felt by many to characterise the domestic life of a substantial portion of the working classes. One commentator described the respectable working-class terraced streets that resulted as 'comparatively pleasant, save for the monotony of the endless bay windows',[11] voicing a common view that by-law homes were adequate but uninspiring (of course, the streets described would have been very much more monotonous, if, like many others, they did *not* have bay windows). 'Monotonously and drearily decent', was another view.[12] Yet despite their perceived drabness, these homes undoubtedly constituted an improvement in basic housing standards. Although there were differences in

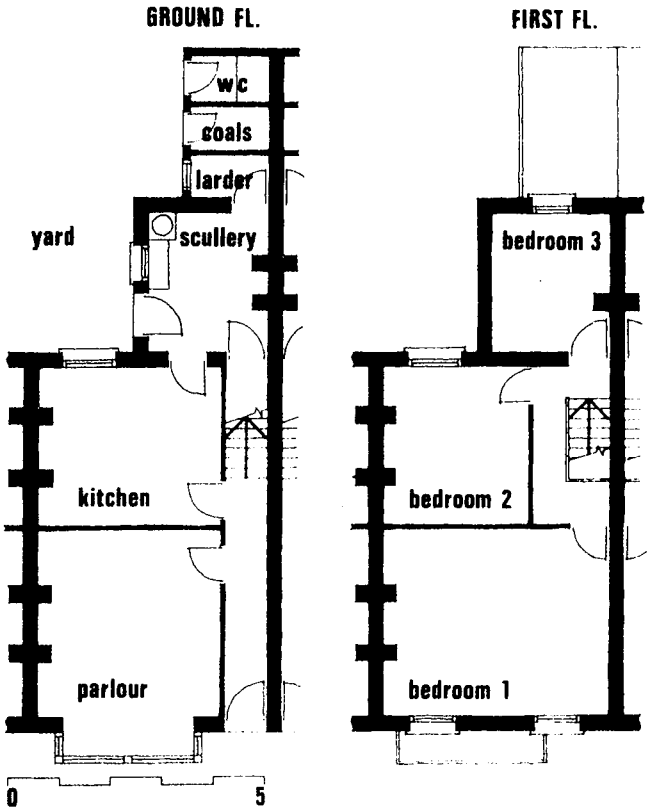

Figure 2 Ground and first floor plans of a small terraced house (adapted from Shirley Foster Murphy (Ed.) *Our Homes and How to Make Them Healthy* (London: Cassell), p. 210).

detail, the basic plan of most of these homes was similar (see Figure 2). Many other working-class homes departed from this typical plan (for instance, the chaotic 'rookeries' cited above, older two-up, two-down houses, larger houses subdivided between a number of families, or city tenements) yet nevertheless, there is a sense in which the by-law layout came to represent an ideal-type, a summation of the symbolic features to be found across many types of housing and not just amongst the 'respectable' inhabitants of the newer terraced streets.

I would like to commence here on a brief tour of one of these homes, a composite constructed from a range of sources, primary and secondary, and concentrating largely on the ground floor. My example is a very clean and orderly one (this article discusses chiefly the meanings of *cleanliness*, forsaking, for the sake of brevity, the equally telling meanings of *dirt*). For the purposes of orientation, I'll start by walking rapidly through the house from front to back; later, I'll reverse the process, turning around and coming back out again, pausing on the way to consider in more detail particularly the forward

portion of the house, and issues to do with cleanliness and 'front', literal and metaph r-ical, in terms of performance.

Within the three ground-floor rooms of the typical by-law house, the progressior of spaces from the front door through to the back gate reflected a move from public to private, and from clean to dirty. The 'parlour' or 'front room' was reserved for 'be t', for use on Sundays and holidays. It housed whatever high-status furniture and obje ts of display the family might possess, and it and its contents were kept clean and polish d accordingly. The central 'living room' or 'kitchen', as the site of most of a famil 's comings and goings, meals and interactions, was a room which was subject to grea er fluctuations in cleanliness and dirtiness, especially as it contained the range, or at le st a frequently lit hearth, which was likely to produce quantities of dust, soot and ash. T is was also, symbolically, the heart of the home, largely because, as one writer of auto i-ography put it, it was 'the place where my mother could always be found'.[13] The sm ll 'scullery' or 'back-kitchen' behind was a functional space where the house's only wa er supply would be situated.[14] It contained, ideally, a sink for washing up, and a copp er for washing; it was dedicated to specific dirty tasks, and it was not a space to *be* in. A d finally, out in the yard were the foul places, the water closet or privy, and the dustb n. These were emptied via the back gate, which opened onto an alley or entry well aw y from the public front of the street. On the first floor of the working-class house, the t o or three bedrooms were strictly private, and, space permitting, zoned according to a e and gender, one for the parents, one for boys and one for girls.

I declared at the outset an intention to examine a number of historiographic l interpretive issues: the first of these concerns the extent to which working-class dom s-ticity, and particularly ideas about women's roles and 'proper' sphere, were influenc d by middle-class practices and values at this date. In the deployment of polish, cleanlin ss and display, in by-law and other working-class homes, do we see, by the late nineteen h century, a reflection of middle-class standards of decency, the increasing influence of ideas about health and hygiene, and the dominant ideal of a certain sort of hom e-centred mother?

This issue of class influence is one that has exercised me to a considerable extent, if only because, in the relatively little that has been written in detail about cleanliness in this period, there is an assumption that the habits of cleanliness were a hegemonic prac-tice, imposed externally, by the middle class and the state upon the working classes.[15] Certainly, by the late nineteenth century, there were many and vigorous attempts to 'civilise' the working classes, to educate them into a certain sort of domesticity. Many official bodies, from board schools to churches with their mothers' meetings, sought to exert such an influence, and often claimed success in their enterprise. For instance, Ellen Chase, a rent collector working under Octavia Hill's system of the management of working-class housing, in Deptford, south-east London, viewed her work as a mixture of moral and material exertion, gradually but surely elevating her mostly poor tenants to greater levels of civilisation, of which cleanliness and order were an important sign:

> As time goes on and the tenants improve, untidy, lounging, indulgent, quarrelsome habits will be left further and further behind, until they [the tenants] will have

> advanced by self-control to self-support, and come to take a proper pride in well-kept, orderly, comfortable, and happy homes.[16]

Here I think we must take up the issue of women's *work*, and its relationship to ideas of domesticity in both the middle and working classes. It has been noted by some historians that, after a period in the early nineteenth century in which women *as workers* were central to debates about economic and political adjustments to industrialisation, by the 1850s 'working-class women largely disappear as topics of political discourse'.[17] Working-class women were no longer central to debates about the conditions of workers and issues of economic justice because, partly through legislative measures and partly through ideology (but not always in reality) they had been placed firmly in the domestic sphere, and removed from the public sphere of work. It is no coincidence that this change took place at the moment when, in the middle classes, the idea of the strict segregation of women into the domestic sphere was at its strongest (though of course it was never uncontested, as many other contributors to this issue make clear).

However, working-class women came right back onto the political agenda by late century. The burning issue at that point was not the conditions of their industrial work, but rather a set of concerns to do with poverty, with living conditions, with infant mortality, and even with the role of women, as mothers, in the feared 'physical deterioration' of the British nation.[18] It is no exaggeration to say that, by this period, working-class women were largely judged, by many observers, by their closeness or otherwise to middle-class ideals of domesticity, motherhood and wifehood in the home.

Concern with work was replaced by concern with domesticity—but of course domestic matters are just as much about *work* as factories, mines, or the ten-hour day. Yet, in many of the discourses that surround cleanliness, a tremendous effort is made to deny that work *as work*. Middle-class ideas of domesticity stressed the home as a place of leisure and refuge from the public world of work—it must be clean, orderly and healthy, *but no work must be seen to take place in order to achieve such a result.*

Compelling evidence of this can be found in the writings of Phillis Browne, author of domestic advice manuals from the 1880s to the 1920s. She writes of the many tasks of cleanliness that must be done, frequently and regularly, to keep the home clean: daily cleaning of living rooms, stairs, halls and passages, polishing of brass door knockers and stair rods, black-leading of the kitchen range, weekly changing of beds (including completely dismantling the bedstead to check its joints and crevices for bugs), and tidying of kitchen cupboards (including the emptying and washing of all storage jars). This is just a very brief summary of Browne's advice; she continues in didactic and prescriptive vein for twenty-five closely-printed pages.[19] Yet she accompanies her exhaustive (and exhausting) list with a rather stunning and on the face of it implausible statement—a skilled housemaid should be able to manage *all* these tasks, she says, 'without bustle and hurry, and with comparatively little fatigue'.[20] The reason for this denial of work becomes clear elsewhere in her writings when Browne declares that:

> I think the wife and mother ought to determine that no forethought or contrivance that she can possibly exert shall be spared by which her husband and her sons may be shielded from discomfort ... with a little arrangement the cleaning of a large portion of the house may be got over without the gentlemen suspecting that it is going on.[21]

Here we have, very clearly, the ideal of home as a refuge from the world and fr m work, an ideal that domestic work, carried out by women, must not be allowed to fr c- ture. Browne's advice is framed to fit the circumstances of the middle-class home, i ut elsewhere in her writings she made it very clear that she believed similar standards of cleanliness should be applied to the working-class home too.[22]

Soap advertisements of the period follow this trope, to an extent: the work of washing in particular is shown in rather restricted ways, and advertisements that dep ct women with their hands in a steaming tub of hot water and dirty washing, or sweati g over a mangle, are very rare. One part of the process that *is* shown is the drying of wa h- ing on the line: these scenes are dominated not by steam and toil, but by sunshine a d fresh breezes (the washing always 'blows', rather than merely hanging, on the lin . Gardens or natural settings are often suggested. Although these images feature part of the washing process, the emphasis is on labour done, the transformation from clean to dirty already rendered, as clothes billow on the line, and nature takes over the job of drying (see Figure 3).

Social investigators Maud Pember Reeves and M. E. Loane both record instances of working-class husbands' anger at the carrying out, by their wives, of domestic tasks of cleanliness in their presence:[23] this denial of domestic work *as work* is one instance where it seems that there is a commonality of values between the middle and worki g classes, and quite possibly a 'civilising' influence taking place (notwithstanding the difference in circumstances between a middle-class home supported by servants and the much smaller working-class home managed and staffed by the mother/wife alone). This is paralleled for women's paid work by the trade union movement's espousal of the family wage, i.e. a male wage sufficient to support a family so that married women would not have to go out to work.[24]

II

Yet if in some ways there was a communication of middle-class values of domesticity to the working classes, this should not blind us to the differences of values and experience between the classes. One point to be made here concerns chronology: there was a moment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when working-class women were being expected, and encouraged, and increasingly organised and educated by government policy, by state and official and quasi-official interventions, to be more like middle-class women in their relationship to domesticity—to stay at home and attend to household and family within certain defined precepts of good mothering and good housekeeping. But this was also the moment, so long and rightly celebrated by women's historians, when middle-class women (or at least some pioneers amongst them) began to step out into the 'widening sphere', to take part more fully in education

Figure 3 Advertisement for Hudson's soap, 1911 (*Reynolds's Newspaper*, 28 May 1911, p. 8).

political processes, and to an extent in professional work.[25] Ironically, at least some of those middle-class women found that professional work as social workers, district nurses, Charity Organisation Society (COS) charity workers, or lady rent collectors like Ellen Chase in Deptford; they became the *instruments* of that official impulse to regularise and control working-class domesticity.

The currents of historical change swirl around in a very complex pattern here, and the move from private to public for some middle-class women accompanied and even to an extent helped to reinforce a move from public to private for many working-class women. At present we have only an imperfect understanding of the differences between middle-class and working-class experience in this context, and, more particularly, the ways in which the different classes defined themselves with reference to (sometimes in imitation of, sometimes in opposition to) each other.

This is where I would like to resume our tour of the by-law home. I have discuss d the well-orchestrated attempts to regulate and 'improve' working-class domestici y, and the influence that the middle-class idea of the home as a place of 'not work' had n working-class households. Yet should we interpret our by-law home as dominated y this and similar influences? A study that takes account of *autobiographical* sour s shows that it is doubtful whether external reforming pressures were the only or ev n the chief factor determining the values of working-class domesticity. Many autob graphical sources are remarkably independent of prevailing debates about standards f housewifery; however, notions of cleanliness do nevertheless feature prominen ly within them. Such notions are couched in a very particular set of values founded r t upon physical efficiency or the idea of hygiene that increasingly characterised offic l debates, but rather upon a recurring idealisation and sentimentalisation of the selfl s and loving mother and her services to her family, services that included the work f cleanliness, and that used it as a badge of respectability in a network of commun y values. Ellen Ross, in her excellent account of working-class motherhood, notes th is sentimental idealisation of the working-class mother, although not, I think, with qu e enough emphasis.[26] My analysis is based on a reading of those autobiographies alrea y cited, and many others.

We had penetrated the house from street door to back gate. Now let's turn arou d and head back out again, thinking specifically about the material culture of the hor e in terms of the *performance* of ideas, ideals and values. We could say that the was e matter and refuse of the yard, and the dirty tasks of the scullery, constituted a 'backsta e' area that supported the social performance of intimate domesticity in the fluctuati g cleanliness of the kitchen, that room where the ideal mother 'could always be foun '. Grace Foakes, the writer of that phrase, gives a simple yet telling description of h r mother:

> My mother was a dear gentle person, who loved us all ... she was small, and to my childish mind, quite beautiful ... I loved the times when I was poorly, because Mother would come and give me hot bread and milk sprinkled with sugar. It never failed to make me feel better. I think the extra bit of loving helped me as much as the bread and milk.[27]

The mother figure is central to working-class life-stories, and descriptions of mothers are very often built chiefly of a blend of remembered tenderness and domestic toil (conceptualised, not as work, but as *service*), in which the tasks of cleanliness play a predominant role.

If the kitchen was about intimate domesticity, then it in turn supported status and public display in the spotless front room or parlour. This was a room of almost ritual- istic designation. Here the best furniture and ornaments were on show, and even in crowded homes, everyday life would rarely be allowed to spill over into this room, which was preserved for Sundays or holidays, or for receiving visitors of some status. The cleanliness of the parlour was sacrosanct; this was the room in which it was most important to achieve and maintain an appearance of polish and purity. And, to consider the 'front of the front', the parlour *window*, on view from the street, was an important site of display. Eileen Baillie, daughter of an East End vicar, emphasises in

her memoir the care taken to control how the glimpse into the interior that the parlour window afforded was presented. She describes how the windows of solidly respectable streets were:

> Heavily draped in bobble-fringed plush and the inevitable Nottingham lace, parted just sufficiently to show the best ornamental vase or china figure displayed on a small table covered with a bright sateen cloth.[28]

Sometimes, Baillie notes, the centrepiece of the display would be a large aspidistra; the 'nasty-minded' assumed that this was to hide the fact that the furniture in the room behind had all gone to the pawnshop; in other words, this was, quite literally, a 'front'.[29]

And finally we come back to our point of entry, the front door and doorstep: these were possibly even more important than the parlour in the display of respectability. The home was a haven from the world, from work, from the street, and from the dirt and pollution that they carried. Work clothes that were not 'dirty' at work became so once they entered the home. Dust and mud that were unavoidable in the street became unwelcome if they entered the home. Dirt was 'matter out of place', and it was most out of place in the private sphere of the home. Notions of 'clean' and 'dirty' were to an extent contingent, and the home functioned as a mechanism for rendering dirty what might be accepted as clean elsewhere, imposing special standards of purity and comfort. The threshold of the home, the doorstep, was the point of transition. Autobiographies frequently describe how it was given special attention, with whitening or hearthstone applied to it and to the pavement in front of it in an act that must be read as a potent symbol of ordering and boundary marking.[30] One social investigator, Maud Pember Reeves, describes a street in Lambeth, south London thus marked:

> On the pavement outside many doors there is to be noticed, in a greater or lesser condition of freshness, a semicircle of hearthstone, which has for its radius the length of the housewife's arm as she kneels on the step.[31]

As the public world entered the private across the boundary of the home, so the private revealed itself to the public here. The fact that the housewife knelt on the step, working outwards, rather that on the pavement working inwards, is suggestive of her close identification with the home; she reaches out but she does not cross its boundary. The fetish for a hearthstoned doorstep was a projection, both literal and metaphorical, of private regimes of cleanliness out into the public world of the street. Even more than the parlour window, this was the home's public front, an external badge of the standards of cleanliness, order and respectability to be found within.

These rigid conventions of cleanliness formed a complex system, complex not least in the effects that it had on the women who were subjected to it. Rules and customs could allow social communication and relationships of family care to be articulated, but they could also be burdensome, even tyrannical. Nevertheless, there are instances in which cleanliness was deployed in a joyful or generous manner. Hannah Mitchell, suffragette and Labour activist, described her wedding day in Bolton in 1895 thus:

> The most vivid memory of my wedding day ... was a little act of kindness, which always seemed to me one of the loveliest things I have ever known ... When I rose early on my wedding day I found that every neighbour had risen earlier still, cleaned her windows, and whitened the flags ... thus giving the whole street quite a festive appearance on that glorious September morning.[32]

The autobiography of Grace Foakes, who I have already cited, is a further case in point. As a child, Grace lived in a small tenement flat close to the London docks. The early part of her autobiography is marked with an atmosphere of claustrophobia, of dark, tall buildings, fogs, falling soot, and a pervading sense of dirt and gloom. This mood intensifies when Grace describes her marriage and the arrival of her first baby: 'I wanted so to be able to put my baby in a lovely clean place, not as that place was with its noise and dirt'.[33] Eventually, in the late 1920s or early 1930s, Grace got her family away from the dirt of London to a new council estate in Dagenham in Essex:[34]

> This was a clean new town and we were part of it. Our children could play in the garden while we women did our housework and washing, each taking pride as to who could make her whites look the whitest or her coloured clothes the most colourful ... The house was cleaned until it shone. Never did I use such elbow grease. The garden was tended, and life became very orderly.[35]

III

I would like here to return to my initial question, what was beyond the 'widening sphere'? The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period that for some middle-class women saw increased educational opportunity, some professional advancement, and greater political involvement. Some of these changes had an impact on working-class women too.[36] However, I would argue that for most working-class women, in this period, the question should not only be 'what is beyond the *widening* sphere?', but also 'how did the *domestic* sphere change?', with better living conditions and the development of a consumer economy allowing, for some, small changes in the quality of their lives *within the confines* of domesticity. I am acutely aware that to equate domesticity with freedom is to run several political risks. For very good reason, the celebration of women's domestic labour can shade from post-feminism into anti-feminism: Simone de Beauvoir attacked a certain sterility within the assertion of domestic order: 'washing, ironing, sweeping, ferreting out rolls of lint from under wardrobes—all this halting of decay is also a denial of life'.[37] Cultural historian Esther Leslie has observed pithily that 'there is something fascist about an ordered house' (referencing that emphasis on traditional domesticity that often characterises political movements of the extreme right).[38] Both of these comments contain truth, yet nevertheless, the words of Grace Foakes in her new Dagenham home do seem to carry some genuine sense of liberation, a liberation *within* rather than *in rejection of* domesticity, and the freedom, through improved material conditions, to pursue a traditional role in circumstances that made it possible to perform that role more easily, to do it better, and therefore to derive more satisfaction from it. As anthropologist Mary Douglas has said in her classic work on the meanings of dirt and cleanliness:

> In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are ... positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea. There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience.[39]

The change I have been describing was a partial, cramped and imperfect freedom, and one that did not even extend to all working-class women, many of whom continued to live in conditions of considerable material deprivation at least until the aftermath of the Second World War. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked in the historiography of working-class women's lives.

This brings me to the closing stage of my argument, which is to take up, briefly, the competing roles of *progress* and *conservatism* in the ideology of domesticity. The idea of modernity is relevant here: Judy Giles has identified the extent to which, despite a stereotype that characterised modernity as belonging to the masculine, public sphere, women in the early twentieth century nevertheless had a real sense of engagement with modernity through their domestic roles.[40] I would like to add something more to this argument, based on a notion (owing much to Alison Light's idea of 'conservative modernity' in the 1930s) that progress and a sense of modernity, as regards domesticity, has often been characterised by a reaching *forward* to *tradition*.[41] There is a striving to realise, as a *future* goal and through *modern* means, a more perfect version of an ideal that is nevertheless characterised as being about traditional, even nostalgic values. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some, mostly middle-class, women moved into the public sphere. At the same time other women, of the middle but especially of the working classes, were enabled, through gradually improving material conditions, to espouse a more 'complete' domesticity that had previously been denied them by poverty and bad housing. At the time both movements were seen, in some quarters, as 'progressive', and as modern. Yet our subsequent historiography, while rightly celebrating middle-class women's successes in the struggle to claim social, economic, legal and political rights, has underplayed, (not been quite sure what to think about?) working-class women's move towards a different sort of freedom, the freedom *not to have to work* outside the home, the freedom to enjoy somewhat improved material conditions and perhaps, in some cases, the contentment of a quiet domesticity. Thus the complex entanglements of gender and class with domesticity at this period suggest a slightly unexpected combination of conservative and progressive ideals as improved material conditions enabled a more 'perfect' *traditional* domesticity, that was nevertheless perceived as progress when contrasted with the often squalid and chaotic living conditions that were held to characterise the effects of industrialisation in the nineteenth century.

The visual rhetoric of soap advertising seems to sum up this contradiction. The advertisement discussed earlier that shows a woman hanging out her washing to dry in a sunlit country scene is characterised by a strong sense of nostalgia, turning to historicist imagery to reference the traditional values of domesticity. The woman wears an old-fashioned sun-bonnet and apron, and the text, while stressing the performance of Hudson's soap as a modern, labour-saving product, also refers to its use by generations of consumers. The same period that saw the production of this advertisement

Figure 4 Advertisement for Omo washing powder, 1914 (*Reynolds's Newspaper*, 14 June 1914, p. 5).

and many others like it also saw women depicted within soap advertisements dressed in the modern garb of the 'new woman' (see Figure 4). Yet here the visual signals of modernity, and the promise of performance and an alleviation of the sweating toil of the laundry, were nevertheless linked to the values of traditional domesticity and its home-centred tasks. Advertising, with its proliferating system of, often contradictory, imagery, was able to reflect, and to offer, a version of domesticity that encompassed very successfully the realisation of traditional values through modernity.

Conclusion

The attentive reader may have noticed an apparent anomaly in the family photograph I commenced with: why does the conventionally clean and neat little boy who sits

s ond from right, with his father's hand protectively on his shoulder, have a very
' minine' bow in his hair? This is where I have to 'come clean' and own up to having
a not-quite-impartial relationship to this piece of historical evidence. These are my
a cestors-in-law—the baby, Doris, was to go on to be, amongst other things, my
h sband's grandmother. Family tradition has it that the boy, whose name was Will,
r used to have his photograph taken unless he could have a ribbon just like his sisters.
(ven what I have said in the closing stages of this article about gender, constraint and
fi edom, I choose to take Will's ribbon as a nice reminder that 'gender' is a useful cate-
g ry of historical analysis not just in the way that it is imposed on and accommodated
b individual subjects, but also in the ways that it can be resisted by them.

N otes

[1] Andrew Mearns & W. C. Preston (1883) *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (London: James Clarke), pp. 7–8.

[2] Martha Vicinus (Ed.) (1972) *Suffer and be Still: women in the Victorian age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

[3] Martha Vicinus (Ed.) (1977) *A Widening Sphere: changing roles of Victorian women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). See Vicinus's Introduction.

[4] Peter N. Stearns (1972) Working-Class Women in Britain, 1890–1914, in Vicinus (Ed.), *Suffer and be Still*. Amanda Vickery's useful and influential historiographical survey of the separate spheres debate excludes consideration of working-class experience due to 'limitations of space' (Amanda Vickery (1993) Golden Age to Separate Spheres: a review of the categories and chronology of English women's history, *Historical Journal*, 36(2), pp. 383–414). However, important and useful studies of working-class women's (and children's) domestic lives include Elizabeth Roberts (1984) *A Woman's Place: an oral history of working-class women 1890–1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell); Ellen Ross (1993) *Love and Toil: motherhood in outcast London 1870–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press); Joanna Bourke (1994) *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890–1940: gender, class and ethnicity* (London: Routledge); and Anna Davin (1996) *Growing up Poor: home, school and street in London 1870–1914* (London: Rivers Oram Press).

[5] Judy Giles (2004) *The Parlour and the Suburb: domestic identities, class, femininity and modernity* (Oxford and New York: Berg).

[6] For further details see Victoria Kelley (forthcoming 2009) *Soap and Water: cleanliness, dirt and the working-classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris).

[7] Charles Booth (1902) *Life and Labour of the People in London*, revised edn, (London: Macmillan); Seebohm Rowntree (1901) *Poverty: a study of town life* (London: Macmillan); Mrs Bernard Bosanquet (Helen Bosanquet, née Dendy): see, for example, (1896) *Rich and Poor* (London: Macmillan); (1898) *The Standard of Life and Other Studies* (London: Macmillan); Miss M. E. Loane: see, for example, (1905) *The Queen's Poor: life as they find it in town and country* (London: Edward Arnold); (1907) *The Next Street But One* (London: Edward Arnold).

[8] See Carolyn Steedman (1992) *Past Tenses: essays on writing, autobiography and history* (London: Rivers Oram Press) for a stimulating collection of writings on the problems and promises of autobiography as historical evidence.

[9] Mearns & Preston, *The Bitter Cry*, pp. 7–8.

[10] John Burnett (1986) *A Social History of Housing 1815–1985*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen; first published 1978), p. 168.

[11] Eileen Baillie (1958) *The Shabby Paradise: the autobiography of a decade* (London: Hutchinson), pp. 35–36.

[12] Maud Pember Reeves (1979) *Round about a Pound a Week* (London: Virago; first publish d 1913), p. 3.

[13] Grace Foakes (1972) *Between High Walls: a London childhood* (London: Shepheard-Walwy p. 5.

[14] M. J. Daunton (1983) *House and Home in the Victorian City: working class housing 1850–1 d* (London: Edward Arnold), pp. 246–247.

[15] See, for instance, Adrian Forty (1986) *Objects of Desire: design and society since 1750* (Lond n: Thames and Hudson), ch. 7. Anne McClintock (1995) in *Imperial Leather: race, gender a d sexuality in the colonial contest* (New York: Routledge) depicts a similar hegemonic imposit n of cleanliness, this time in a colonial context.

[16] Ellen Chase (1929) *Tenant Friends in Old Deptford* (London: Williams & Norgate), p. 220.

[17] Patricia E. Johnson (2001) *Hidden Hands: working-class women and Victorian social-probl m fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press), p. 11.

[18] Jose Harris (1993) *Private Lives, Public Spirit: a social history of Britain 1870–1914* (Oxfo d: Oxford University Press), p. 81.

[19] Phillis Browne (1883) House-Cleaning, in Shirley Foster Murphy (Ed.) *Our Homes and H w to Make Them Healthy* (London: Cassell), pp. 869–894.

[20] Ibid., p. 870.

[21] Phillis Browne (1877) *Common-Sense Housekeeping* (London: Cassel, Petter & Galpi , pp. 41–42.

[22] Browne, in Murphy (Ed.), *Our Homes*, p. 870; Phillis Browne (1880) *What Girls Can D a book for mothers and daughters* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin); see section on 'Charita le Work'. See also Dena Attar (1987) *A Bibliography of Household Books Published in Brit n 1800–1914* (London: Prospect).

[23] Pember Reeves, *Round About*, p. 88; M. E. Loane (1908) *From Their Point of View* (Lond n: Edward Arnold), p. 42.

[24] R. J. Morris (1990) Clubs, Societies and Associations, in F. M. L. Thompson (Ed.) *T e Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950.* Vol. 3, *Social Agencies and Institutio s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 429.

[25] Harris, *Private Lives*, pp. 23–32.

[26] Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 24; see also Davin, *Growing up Poor*, p. 26.

[27] Foakes, *Between High Walls*, p. 11.

[28] Baillie, *Shabby Paradise*, p. 36.

[29] Ibid., p. 36.

[30] See, for instance, Pember Reeves, *Round About*, pp. 4–6; Baillie, *Shabby Paradise*, p. 138; Edith Hall (1977) *Canary Girls and Stockpots* (Luton: Workers' Educational Association), p. 8 Robert Roberts (1990) *The Classic Slum: Salford life in the first quarter of the century* (London Penguin; first published 1971), pp. 37 & 124.

[31] Pember Reeves, *Round About*, p. 4.

[32] Hannah Mitchell (1977) *The Hard Way Up* (London: Virago), pp. 90–91.

[33] Foakes, *Between High Walls*, p. 81.

[34] Ibid., p. 38.

[35] Ibid., pp. 40 & 42.

[36] Harris, *Private Lives*, pp. 23–32. The suffrage campaign received notable support from Lancashire mill-girls (Harris, *Private Lives*, p. 28), and the Women's Co-operative Guild campaigned on a number of issues, most notably for maternity rights for working women (Jean Gaffin & David Thoms (1983) *Caring and Sharing: the centenary history of the women's Co-operative Guild* (Manchester: Co-operative Union), pp. 55–56).

[37] Simone de Beauvoir (1993) *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Everyman's Library, first published 1949), p. 474.

[38] Esther Leslie (1996) The Exotic of the Everyday: critical theory in the parlour, *things*, 4 p. 99.

)] Mary Douglas (1991) *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of purity and taboo* (London: Routledge; first published 1966), p. 2.
)] Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb.*
1] Alison Light (1991) *Forever England: femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars* (London: Routledge).